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ABSTRACT

American Indian news as reported in urban newspapers and frontier weeklies during the 1820s and 1830s was shaped by the prejudices of the age as well as by the particular historical circumstances which brought Indians into conflict with White Americans. The press portrayed a culture for which it had little abiding sympathy or understanding, consigning Indians to negative stereotypes which offered an inaccurate portrait of Indians or Indian life. Newspapers published anecdotes which defined Indians by their weaknesses, while Indians in conflict with Whites were invariably characterized as savage and violence-prone. Moreover, in contrast to Whites, violent Indians in news stories were depicted with no explanation of the causes of their actions, as if they were innately violent. Additionally, the pre-telegraph antebellum press was based not on journalistic investigation or enterprise but on private correspondence, word-of-mouth reports and speculation, all sources open to exaggeration and error. Distortions, rumors, myths, and stereotypes in the media served an ideological function, namely to position the Indian at the margins of American life, to ensure continuing domination of Indians by Whites, and to preclude any moral confrontation with the idea of Indians as equals. (Sixty-seven notes are included.) (KEH)

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News and the "Indian Problem" in the Antebellum Period

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News and the "Indian Problem" in the Antebellum Era

In 1836, the *State-Rights' Sentinel* of Augusta, Georgia, published a letter from an unidentified writer who was concerned about the treatment of the Cherokees in his state. The writer went to some lengths to defend the Cherokees against the aggressive Georgians. But the most notable aspect of the letter was the writer's acceptance of a Cherokee religious ceremony known as the "New Corn Dance."

> This dance...is held sacred by them and is held in religious reverence; and however ridiculous their ceremonies on such occasions may appear to the white man, they hold them in reverence, and offer them as a thanksgiving to that God who looks upon the red as he does upon the white man, for his kindness in providing the products of the season to supply their hunger.[1]

This writer's appreciation of Indian religion was rare in the 1830s. More often, white Americans treated native religions and cultures as quaint but decidedly uncivilized practices, in no way comparable to Christianity or other European ideas. This writer, however, recognized that the Cherokees were sincere in their religious beliefs and that even though such beliefs might appear "ridiculous," they deserved the respect of the whites.

The rarity of such a passage in American newspapers in the early nineteenth century highlights the pervasive ethnocentrism of American life at that time. In the culture as in the press, Indians were routinely viewed as inferior creatures, more to be pitied and removed than appreciated. Prejudice, of course, helps explain such attitudes. But prejudice alone does not account for the contrasting images of Indians in the press in the early years of the nineteenth century. This paper

investigates these images by describing the nature of Indian news during the 1820s and 30s. Specifically, this study examines two broad Indian stereotypes as a way of highlighting the evolving themes and story forms by which news about Indians was defined during these years. As demonstrated in the following pages, these stereotypes encompassed a variety of topics about Indians and Indian life. More importantly, these stereotypes helped define Indian news in ways which were not representative of the reality of Indian life. As a result, the definition of Indian news in the early part of the nineteenth century was both arbitrary and unselfconscious, shaped by the prejudices of the age as well as the particular historical circumstances which brought Indians into conflict with white Americans. By describing Indian stereotypes and examining the assumptions on which they are based, this paper identifies the institutional and cultural patterns of the press as it portrayed a culture for which it had little abiding sympathy or understanding.

The news stories analyzed in this paper cover a variety of Indian news events from the 1820s and 30s. The newspapers in the study include selected daily and weekly newspapers chosen from several geographic areas. In addition, the analysis makes use of Indian dispatches originally published in one paper but republished in another. Although the Indian news stories analyzed here represent only a small number of those published in the antebellum period, they encompass opinions and attitudes from urban papers such as the *United States Gazette* of Philadelphia and the New Orleans *Picayune* as well as frontier weeklies such as the *Constitutional Journal* of Helena, Arkansas, and the *Western Weekly Review* of Franklin, Tennessee.

Culture, Domination and the Press

American newspapers have long found Native Americans an elusive and troublesome subject. The reasons for this are numerous and complex, reflecting three centuries of European and American racial bias and cultural misunderstanding. Even Columbus' name for the natives, *los Indios*, adversely affected European and American conceptions of native people. As Robert Berkhofer has noted, "By classifying all these many peoples as *Indians*, Whites categorized the variety of cultures and societies as a single entity..., thereby neglecting or playing down the social and cultural diversity of Native Americans then--and now--for the convenience of simplified understanding."[2] European philosophical and religious beliefs were also important influences on the white attitudes toward the natives. Historian Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. has noted, for example, that both Christian and Aristotelian ideas were said "to explain everything from the first and last ticks of history to what happens to the egg prior to the hatching of the chick."[3] But the New World generally--and Native Americans specifically--fell outside of European explanations of the world, leaving the natives without legitimate standing in European eyes. Thus, as Crosby notes, Europeans found it easy to see the unusual ways of the Indians as demonic. "The Europeans had either to conceive of the naturalness of cultural diversity and invent cultural toleration to go along with it, or to assume that Indians were in league with Hell."[4]

In colonial North America, both the French and the English used religious conversion to justify their conquest of the New World. But as

James Axtell has noted, both Catholic and Protestant missionaries sought to "civilize" the natives as they converted them, believing that unschooled "savages" could not be trusted with the holy ordinances of the church until they had adopted European ideas of order, industry and manners.[5] Not surprisingly, this process usually destroyed native traditions. "At its most extreme," Axtell writes, "the civilization process entailed the wholesale substitution of a European lifestyle for the natives' own, beginning with material artifacts--clothing, weapons, tools--and ending with deeply ingrained habits of thought and feeling."[6]

By the nineteenth century, a set of ideas about Indians was well established in American thought. Although Indians were frequently categorized as either noble or ignoble, Roy Harvey Pearce has noted that both of these extremes were "resolved into one image, that of the savage whose life was to be comprehended by the idea of savagism."[7] The Indian, then, was white society's "other," a characterization which emphasized the differences between Indians and whites. Accordingly, Indians were seen as diametrically opposed to the main principles of American life. "Whether evaluated as noble or ignoble, whether seen as exotic or degraded, the Indian as an image was always alien to the white," Berkhofer writes.[8] Thus the Indian was useful to white Americans, if only as a way of contrasting civilization and savagery. As Pearce has pointed out, the Indian "lived as an example of the savage life out of which civilized Americans had long grown. He was, in fact, a means of measuring that growth."[9]

Berkhofer, Pearce and others[10] have examined the image of the Indian within the "myth and symbol" tradition and have done much to determine its origins and effects. But the press has never been fully

examined for its role in this symbol-building process. This study argues that the press itself, as an institution with an arbitrary set of values and practices, helped define the Indian in ways which have not been clearly understood.

This symbol-building view of the press is derived from a theoretical view of communication as ritual, an idea advanced by James Carey.[11] In contrast to the transmission view of communication where influence is transferred from the sender to the receiver, the ritual view of communication sees it as "a situation where nothing new is learned but in which a particular view of the world is portrayed and confirmed."[12] Thus communication—in this case news about Indians—is "not pure information but a portrayal of the contending forces in the world."[13] In theory, then, nineteenth century news reports about Indians did more than supply facts and information; they helped establish and confirm the social order and they helped infuse that order with meaning. How this process worked—and its effects on Native Americans—is the subject of this study.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the press, like the rest of American society, approached the Indian with a specific set of ideas about progress and civilization and the Indians' place in the world. Operating within this framework, the newspapers portrayed the Indians in a variety of ways, but all of them served the needs and interests of white society. Thus the press portrait of the Indian was functional for mainstream (white) society because it assigned the Indian to a subordinate position through the creation and repetition of stereotypical and oversimplified images.

The Indian as Caricature

Reduced to its simplest terms, the press portrayal of Native Americans in the first decades of the nineteenth century involved two major stereotypes: the "good Indian" or Noble Savage image popularized in the romantic fiction and poetry of the day, and the ignoble "bad Indian" symbolized by the image of the Indian as a heartless, subhuman species, incapable of civilization and intent on bringing violence and death to all whose path he crossed. Both of these stereotypes turned up in the press on a regular basis. Between the extremes was a wide middle area where Indians could be seen as full and sympathetic characters, worthy of white attention. This more realistic portrait of Indians sometimes turned up in the press too, but it was the extremes which controlled the Indian image and helped it persist as long as it did. Thus the two extremes shaped the Indian image in the press by providing convenient and popular story lines for understanding and explaining Indian behavior. In this way, the press extended and repeated familiar themes about Indians—themes which conformed to two severely limited images of American Indians.

Legend and Romance: The portrayal of the Indian as Noble Savage goes back to the European *philosophes* of the Enlightenment and to pre-revolutionary America[14] but it gained its widest fame in 1826 with the publication of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans.* In his Noble Savage embodiment, the Indian was a brave and fearless warrior as well as a natural aristocrat and child of nature. Such ideas appealed to Europeans as well as Americans and these idealized images sometimes turned up in the pages of the American press.

The mourning of an Indian woman over the twin graves of her husband and child was the subject of a romantic lament in a Tennessee weekly in 1834. Under the headline "Indian Eloquence," the paper reprinted the woman's supposed speech:

> The father of Life and Light has taken from me the apple of my eye, and the core of my heart, and hid him in these two graves. I will moisten the one with my tears, and the other with the milk of my breast, till I meet them in that country where the sun never sets.[15]

The paper gave no source for the speech, but it seems unlikely that anyone at the newspaper ever witnessed such a scene. Although the story may have been based on an actual incident, it seems more likely that the account was written by a white author for an Eastern periodical and then reprinted in Tennessee. But whatever its origin, this account appears to owe more to white images of the Noble Savage than to the actual grief of a mourning Indian woman. In fact, this story plays into the myth of the Noble Savage by portraying the grief and tragedy of Indian existence and by suggesting Indian happiness only in "that country where the sun never sets."

The same paper also reprinted a commentary from the Washington *Telegraph* in 1838. According to this story, a private captured by Seminoles, reported that as the Indians prepared to execute him, he was saved by a 17-year-old Indian girl who rushed to him at the last minute and won his release. The paper concluded that the private's story related "a singular development of noble feeling and humanity upon the part of

the Indians."[16] The private's story may be true but it is remarkably similar to the Pocahontas-Capt. John Smith legend of colonial Virginia:

> Then the maiden Pocahontas
> Rushes forward, none can stop her,
> Throws her arms about the captive
> Cries,—"oh spare him! Spare the Paleface!"[17]

In both stories, the Indian women display a touch of nobility and show that they can be as humane and sympathetic as whites, at least under some circumstances. Yet the Florida story concluded by separating Indians from whites under everyday conditions: "...we only introduce the adventure here to show how much different their conduct under ordinary circumstances from that of the white men's."

In practice, then, the image of the "good Indian" had its limitations and these also turned up in the press. In a report from its Washington correspondent, *The United States Gazette* in 1830 discussed one of the most sensitive areas of Indian-white relations: intermarriage. Was an Indian man good enough to marry a white woman? The *Gazette* writer thought so, though he expressed doubts about proponents of the Indian Removal Bill then under discussion. An Indian named Riggs had married a white woman from Connecticut, an act which caused "considerable excitement." There was also continuing public interest in the success or failure of the marriage. According to the paper:

> His wife has been observed, by visiters [sic], to be melancholy; and it appears that her husband has given her sufficient cause, inasmuch as he has taken several squaws into his house, in consequence of which, I understand, she has been made seriously unhappy, that she has more than once made attempts on her own life.[18]

But this tale proved nothing, the *Gazette* reporter claimed. After all, "There is as much vice among us, as among the Indians; and if we are to be acquitted or condemned from the aggregate of vice, we shall probably be in a worse condition than the Cherokee." Despite his optimism, the reporter noted that these facts "will probably be used to show that the Indians have not benefitted by our christianizing efforts."[19] This treatment of Indian-white marriage reveals the shallowness of the Noble Indian idea. It was one thing to praise the Indian in nature or in the abstract, but it was quite another to actually accept an Indian as a marriage partner, in effect admitting Indian equality with whites. The *Gazette* was prepared to do so in this case, but there were many others who were not. In any event, the *Gazette* knew that this Indian was being portrayed not as a bad individual but as a representative of his race. It was an unfair portrayal, of course, but it was not an uncommon one in the pages of American newspapers.

The Evil Indian: More common than the Noble Savage image was the press portrait of the bad Indian, particularly the cruel and violent Indian. In the 1830s, this was largely due to the Seminole War in Florida, where tales of murder and torture became staples of reporting about the war. The evil Indian was also a frequent theme of reporting from the frontier, where conflicts with white settlers caused additional news reports.

An example from the Albany [N.Y.] *Argus* shows how the scales were tipped against the Indians on the frontier. The Albany story was taken from the Fayette County [Mo.]*Western Monitor* in July 1829. The *Argus* headlined the story, "Bloodshed on the Frontier" but the original title was also published: "Indian Murders in Missouri." The story opened on a

serious note: "We have to perform the melancholy duty of announcing the murder of three most respectable citizens of this county. . . ." The paper then described the confrontation between the Indians and the whites in terms which blamed the Indians: "The whites then finding it was useless to reason further with them, and seeing that some of the Indians had their guns to their faces, discharged one of their guns upon the Indians."[20] The whites shot first, but the Indians were assigned the blame, both for their perceived stubbornness and their apparent threats to the whites.

The Southwestern frontier was also threatened by Indians. In an unsigned but official letter, an Arkansas newspaper described the exploits of the feared Comanches, emphasizing their contempt for authority:

> Free as the buffalo themselves, they acknowledge no superior—depreciating upon the Mexicans of the interior States, ravaging and burning their towns[,] murdering their people, sometimes taking prisoners, which they either torture to death or make slaves of, carrying off immense herds of mules and horses.[21]

This writer seemed most concerned about the Indians' superior attitude and he was not content to let the idea slip by without comment: "Their impunity heretofore prompts these wandering hordes to look upon themselves as the most powerful of nations...." Clearly, the Comanches were a threat to the white society and the writer was doing his duty by reporting this fact officially. By the same token, the newspaper was doing its duty, alerting the public to the danger and assigning the Comanches a position as the evil raiders of the Southwest. If there was a humane aspect to this tribe, it was not made clear in such news reports.

The Seminole War in the mid-1830s provided numerous examples of Indian violence and the press frequently used these reports to emphasize the savagery of the Seminoles. Alarmist reporting was the order of the day. In early 1836, for example, the Jacksonville *Courier* appealed for immediate military aid and claimed that "[t]he whole of East Florida is in danger." The editor put the point in emotional terms: "We must not only abandon our property to destruction, but, stripped of all our hard earnings, must fight for our lives, our women and our children."[22]

In other stories, the Seminoles became notorious for their methods of murder. The papers often reported the exact number of bullet or arrow wounds in the victims as well as the details of the scalping or other mutilations of the bodies: "Through Gen. Thompson were shot fifteen bullets, and sixteen through Rogers."[23] Such information presumably satisfied the public's morbid curiosity, but it also emphasized the apparent blood lust of the Seminoles.

Another example of sensational reporting followed the defeat of Major Francis L. Dade's troops in late 1835. A Mobile *Chronicle* report published in *The United States Gazette* carried an alarming headline—"Horrid Massacre"—and pointed out that 112 men were killed while only three survived the Seminole ambush. The paper also noted that numerous scalps were taken. The story ended with an editorial comment:

> We do not remember the history of a butchery more horrid, and it stands without an example in the annals of Indian warfare. Our citizens we are sure, will meet together and send some relief to the suffering and defenceless inhabitants of Florida.[24]

Unfortunately this story was wrong both in its particulars and its implications. The actual number of casualties was too high,[25] though it should be said that such information is difficult to confirm even under the best of circumstances. But the report also failed to mention that the scalps were not taken by the Seminoles but by a band of former slaves who were Seminole allies and who arrived shortly after the battle.[26] More importantly, both the *Gazette's* headline and the *Chronicle's* closing commentary framed the ambush as a massacre, a term which put the engagement in its most alarming light. For example, the *Chronicle* did not "remember the history of a butchery more horrid," and said this massacre was "without example in the annals of Indian warfare." Such conclusions, however, overstated the truth. The Mobile editor forgot, or perhaps did not know about, the annihilation of 634 soldiers—including 68 officers—under the command of Gen. Arthur St. Clair in 1791.[27] Chief Little Turtle and his band of Miamis killed *six times* the number killed in the Dade ambush. So much for "the annals of Indian warfare."

The *Chronicle* also spoke of the need to relieve the "defenceless inhabitants of Florida." But in this story, such a phrase implied that the massacre involved ordinary citizens who had no chance to defend themselves. But if a massacre is defined as "the indiscriminate killing in numbers of the unresisting or defenseless," as one modern dictionary suggests,[28] then this battle was not a massacre. No women or children were involved.[29] In addition, Major Dade and his troops were well armed—they even hauled a six-pound cannon along on their fatal march. When the Indians ambushed them, the soldiers put up a gallant defense, even

building a makeshift breastwork from trees they cut when the Indians temporarily withdrew.

Such details, however, did not come through in the *Chronicle's* account. There the fight was a "massacre," an inflammatory term readily applied by the contemporary press to incidents in which every soldier was killed by Indians. But there were three survivors of this attack. Was it, then, a massacre? Perhaps—because the Indians intended to kill every soldier. In any event, the *Chronicle* was less interested in a precise definition of the word than in conveying a sense of outrage and alarm over the utter defeat of Major Dade and his troops. Significantly, "massacre" was rarely applied when whites successfully killed a band of Indian warriors. In other words, the ambush of Dade's men was a massacre not because innocent people were involved or because every soldier was killed but primarily because the Indians won. If Dade had successfully destroyed the attacking Seminoles, no newspaper would have called it a massacre. In this way, the *Chronicle* protected the interests of its Southern readers—the white population—by reporting the battle in a highly emotional way and emphasizing the dangers to the larger population.

Three days later the *Gazette* published a Congressional report which confirmed the savagery of the Seminoles. Mr. Benton, a Congressman, told his colleagues that the Seminoles were naturally a bad race and that even other Indians thought so, as "signified by their name *Seminole*, which, in Indian, means 'wild,' 'runaway;'...."[30] In short, war news produced not only sensational details of violence and death at the hands of the Seminoles but also racial bigotry and hatred.

Perhaps the most unfair reporting from the war were stories which attempted to demonstrate the treachery and inhumanity of the Seminoles. In 1837, for example, the New Orleans *Picayune* explained that the removal of the Seminoles was necessary because they could not be trusted: "Their fate *seems* to be a hard one, but their treachery, and the safety of our white population require it." Then the paper explained the main flaw in the native character: "When once the Indian is aroused to revenge and war, his spirit will never be subdued. They cannot—must not be trusted." An editorial in the *Picayune* echoed this judgment when discussing Seminole chief Oceola: "This fellow is possessed of great daring—and we shall not be surprised to hear further of his tricks and treachery."[31]

In other reports, the Indians were shown to be subhuman because they did things—desperate things under great duress—which no (white) human would do. Thus a report from a Florida paper told of some Seminole women and children who were captured. "In the evening one of the squaws was observed to give her children a drink from a coffee pot," the story said. The woman soon escaped, but her three children remained in captivity. Concluded the report: "Her children were all found dead, from *poison* administered by their unnatural mother."[32] This was a terrible and desperate act, of course, but it was presented in the press as evidence of the cruelty and inhumanity of the Seminoles, who, like animals, had no moral standards and no genuine feelings toward their young. The report made no attempt to understand the motives of the mother or to speculate on her fears or feelings; the implication was of a woman incapable of genuine human feeling. In short, this Indian woman was defined by her weaknesses and her weaknesses were made glaring by the drama of war.

The same Florida report included a second incident of Indian cruelty. After a fight in a swamp, the story said, the Indians retreated in defeat. "Before their flight they strangled their children by stuffing their mouths and nostrils with *mud moss*. The children were found in that condition after the battle was over."[33] Again, inhumanity was the rule, without any regard for the terror and pain that must have driven the Seminoles to commit their desperate acts. In this way, the Seminoles were defined not by their pain or suffering but by their callousness and cruelty.

Such characterizations contrast with the reporting of similar cases among whites in one important detail: explanation. Unlike the Seminoles, whites who committed terrible crimes were frequently provided a disclaimer by the press. Thus the Augusta *State Rights' Sentinel* in 1834 reported the murder of two sailors by one James M. Hardy, a fellow shipmate. The headline itself provided the sailor's excuse: "Effects of Intemperance."[34] Another story, this one a suicide report from an 1837 Newark *Daily Advertiser*, explained the woman's action in three words: "She was deranged."[35] The New York *Journal of Commerce* followed a similar pattern when reporting the suicide of a well known music publisher: "His affairs were not embarrassed, but he had some time ago lost his wife and daughter also, which had so much preyed upon his mind as to break down his spirits."[36] This explanation—extreme depression—could have been applied to the Seminole woman above. Significantly, it was not.

Newspaper stories of white cruelty to children also followed this explanatory pattern. When a young woman abandoned an infant in Ohio, the newspaper explained that she had left a note with the baby "alleging

all sorts of distresses as the cause of her conduct." But the townspeople had a more complicated explanation: "[T]he child did not belong to the woman; but she was the hireling of a *higher* power, and the child the innocent offspring of shame."[37] Either way, the woman's actions warranted explanation in the press.

Drunkenness was the explanation for maternal cruelty in two other 1837 stories from the *Picayune*. One involved a woman who fell into a drunken stupor while holding her child before a fire. "The still drunken mother never awoke until the child was burnt to death," the paper reported.[38] Still another drunken mother was stopped before she could stuff her baby down the "sluices of the Canal street sewer, New York."[39] The editors of the *Picayune* printed many stories about the evils of strong drink. Liquor is not a satisfactory explanation for these cruelties, of course, but at least it made the actions of these whites understandable. The Seminoles got no explanation at all.

Such reporting reduced the Seminoles and other Indians to one-dimensional creatures. Their virtues as people, or even as warriors, were rarely mentioned. Their tribal life, their social organization, their religious practices—all important aspects of Indian life—were of little interest to the newspapers. Both on the frontier and on the battlefield, Indians had a more dramatic role to play. Indians were, after all, the enemy and the enemy was evil by definition. Under such circumstances, it is not surprising to find anti-Indian prejudice in the papers. But such reporting went further than simple prejudice. By overemphasizing the treachery and cruelty of Indians and underplaying their human qualities, news from the Seminole War reinforced the stereotype of Indians as ruthless, subhuman

savages, incapable of civilization. Unfortunately for American Indians, this image persisted throughout the nineteenth century.

The Nature of News

Newspapers in the first half of the nineteenth century were particularly unsuited to the task of explaining the Indian in an sympathetic or understanding way. Not only did the papers rely on stereotypes, but they also attempted to explain Indians from a distance, a procedure which compounded errors and led to greater confusion about the reality of Indian life. Few journalists had extensive experience with Indians in the early part of the nineteenth century and the practice of sending reporters into the field for first-hand observations of Indians was not yet established. In fact, many editors, especially in rural communities, were not trained as journalists at all. First and foremost, they were printers and they usually worked at every job in the office: reporting, typesetting, advertising, circulation and more.[40] As a result, Indian news stories came from a variety of outside sources, including private letters, anecdotes, tall tales, government correspondence, and, on occasion, rumors and hearsay. Such stories reflected the individual prejudices of the writers, prejudices generally not challenged by editors. In addition, many stories repeated themes which lent support to the familiar stereotypes, not to a full understanding of Indians or the Indian side of issues. The effect of this informal newsgathering process was Indian news which relied as much on stereotype and images as upon actual observations and reporting of Indian life and culture. In other words, the newspaper, in concert with the rest of

the cultural machinery, created and sustained a stereotyped and limited image of the Indian.

The Invisible Indian: If the newsmaking process frequently emphasized the weaknesses and failures of Indians, it also let many Indian stories slip through unreported. Despite a flurry of reports from the Seminole War, Indians were not the stuff of everyday news in most American newspapers in the 1820s and 30s. This is hardly a surprise, of course, since newspapers were founded by and edited for the white majority population whose information needs were directed toward such news items as international affairs, business news, state and national politics, not Indians. Moreover, most Indians had moved away from white population centers by the early years of the nineteenth century and they were of little concern to newspaper editors or their readers, many of whom were merchants and tradesmen who had little connection to Indians. Also, many Eastern papers looked for news in London and on the continent, where American merchants and traders had continuing commercial ties.[41] This fact helps explain why American newspapers frequently carried news about politics and change in Europe and elsewhere. In 1823, for example, the Providence *Gazette* ran page one articles on such exotic places as Egypt, Madagascar and China.[42] The continuing hostilities between France and Spain was also much in the news that year, but Indians made few appearances in the *Gazette*.[43] In the 1830s, the Charleston [S.C.] *Mercury* was a highly commercial newspaper with regular reports on the money and cotton markets. The paper also published news and features from Europe, including adventure and romantic pieces from *Chamber's Edinburgh Journal* and the *Royal Gazette*.

In short, a reader of the *Mercury* could find more information about the actions of European royalty than about the lives of American Indians.[44]

The presence of the Indians was ignored even by some of those writing about the American West. In June 1835, for example, the Augusta *State-Rights' Sentinel* published a long piece on western emigration taken from Hall's *Western Monthly Magazine*. The article was explicit about the desire of Americans for Western lands: "We have already suggested that although every part of the Western country is good, and some of it surpassingly excellent, a large portion of out people are continually looking for better land."[45] The West was described both as "Eden" and as a "newly discovered Eldorado." In another passage, the writer speculated about the number of "Alexanders among us, who having overrun every known field of ambition, are sighing for new worlds to conquer." Despite this military language, the writer makes no mention of Indians or the danger posed by them on the frontier. Indeed, the conquest of the West was taken as an inevitable part of the American character:

> Our steamboats have ascended the Mississippi to the falls of St. Anthony;...our traders pass annually over vast deserts to Santa Fe, and the adventurous trapper has sought the haunts of the beaver beyond the Rocky Mountains; and yet the lust for newer lands, and for novel scenes of commercial enterprise, is undiminished.[46]

Yet this expansion of American enterprise proceeds without a single mention of the Indians or their place in the West. Perhaps this was just wishful thinking, a bold vision of the West as uninhabited land, ripe for the taking. But this vision also provides a clue into the press positioning of Indians in the West. That is, in the inevitable conquest of the American

West, the Indians were of little consequence. Destiny was with the new nation and its expansion from Atlantic to Pacific was clear for all to see. At best, Indians were an obstacle to be overcome and controlled. Ultimately, however, Indian conquest is presented here as this a mere detail in the powerful work of taming a continent. No wonder, then, that this writer overlooked the Indian as he imagined the settling of the West.

On some occasions, however, Indians did break into the newspapers in a powerful way. Most notably, violence and Indian-white conflict assured Indians of a presence in the news, albeit a negative one. In the mid-1830s, as noted earlier, the Seminole War was widely covered by the press both in the South and elsewhere. When they were not involved in violence, however, Indians were often overlooked by the press because they were outside the range of white social and cultural interests by which news was defined.

The Anecdotal Indian: One of the continuing ways which Indians entered the press was in anecdotes and jokes, many of them based on cultural differences and some openly racist. Thus the image of the "bad Indian" turned up in a bit of doggerel printed in a Tennessee weekly. Wrote an unidentified poet:

Tobacco is an Indian,
It was the d—l sowed the seed;
It drains your pockets—scents your clothes,
And makes a chimney of your nose![47]

Even as a joke, this poem is uncomplimentary to Indians, suggesting comparisons between Indians and several distasteful aspects of smoking. In addition, such treatment of Indians emphasized their "otherness" because it separated them from the more "civilized" ways of whites, who, after all, were less likely to "drain your pockets" or "scent your clothes." The poem, in short, was a small confirmation of racial stereotypes about Indians.

This theme was repeated in a sketch published in a Georgia paper in 1835. The topic of this story was not Indians but their dogs: "Their [sic] are no greater thieves in existence than Indian dogs; not even excepting the old squaws.... With the last, it is a matter of habit, and practice; but with the former, it is instinct."[48] This statement is significant not so much because it is prejudicial but because of the way it conveys this prejudice. Indian dogs, like Indian women, are summed up in a sweeping statement that is less fact than hyperbole. Significantly, specific dogs and women are not described, nor is a particular tribe named. The purpose of the sketch, then, is not to provide information but to entertain the reader by having a little fun at the expense of the Indian. A single such comment is probably harmless. But this comment is representative of a way of thinking about Indians which found its way into the press again and again. For that reason, such comments should be considered for their cumulative effect

which operated over time to define the Indian in the press as deficient as compared to whites.

Even praise for Indians often included elements of condescension. For instance, a report published in an Arkansas paper cited the patriotism of a Creek chief known as Little Turtle. According to the report, the chief was impressed by Kosciuszko, the Polish-American Revolutionary War hero, but he could not pronounce the Polish name. Instead, the chief called him "Kotcho," which was, the paper said, "the nearest approach to Kosciuszko that his unpracticed organs could accomplish...." The chief was also described as an excitable man. When he spoke, he "walked rapidly about the room, with angry gesticulations, and swinging his tomahawk...."[49]

The anecdote was also a vehicle for the "good Indian." A newspaper story published in the mid-1830s which played up the wit of John Sequashquash, an Indian from Connecticut. According to the report, Sequashquash got drunk and soon found himself before a justice of the peace. But Sequashquash

> would only tell the JP, "Your honor is very wise—y-y-your honor is very wise...."
>
> The next day (after a night in jail) the JP tells him what he said. The Indian says:
>
> "Did I call you wise?" said the Indian, with a look of incredulity.
>
> "Yes," answered the magistrate.
>
> "Then," replied John, "I must have been drunk true enough."[50]

In this example, the Indian gets to demonstrate his cleverness at the expense of white authority. Such cleverness helps reveal this Indian as a more fully developed character because it assigns him a sophisticated

verbal skill, the same kind of skill assigned to whites. In this way, Sequashquash is shown as a "good Indian," worthy of white attributes. On the other hand, the positive image is offset by the Indian's drunkenness, a sign here of racial inferiority. Finally, the literal truth of this anecdote is open to question. Indeed, the story appeared in the paper not as a news report but under the heading, "Indian Anecdote," a signal that its value was not information but entertainment. In this context, the Indian was an example of both cleverness and irresponsibility, yet still positioned as an object of amusement for the white population.

Private Views as Public News: One of the reasons for the repetition of stereotypes and misinformation in the press was the unreliable and individual nature of press reports in the early part of the nineteenth century. News about Indians, like news about many other topics, came to the newspapers from a variety of sources, not all of them trustworthy. Private letters, official correspondence, reports from other newspapers, and even rumors about Indians made their way into American newspapers, almost all without benefit of verification. In fact, many Indian news reports were actually private letters which were not written for publication. The publication of such letters helped expand the range of Indian news in many papers but it also opened the papers to some highly prejudiced accounts of Indian life and culture.

The reminiscences of Gen. Thomas S. Woodward are an example of private correspondence which became news. Gen. Woodward, a prominent citizen of Alabama, had many experiences with Seminoles and Creeks during the early decades of the nineteenth century. In 1857, while retired in Louisiana, Woodward wrote about his experiences in a series of letters,

which soon found their way into the Montgomery *Mail*, the Columbus [Ga.] *Sun* and the Union Springs [Ala.] *Gazette*.[51] An editor at the *Mail*, J. J. Hooper, was given one of Woodward's letters and was impressed enough to request additional reminiscences from the general. These were published in the *Mail* in 1858. In 1859, Hooper brought out a collection of the general's letters under this self-explanatory title: *Woodward's Reminiscences of the Creek, or Muscogee Indians, Contained in Letters to Friends in Georgia and Alabama.* In the book's "Introduction," Hooper explained that the original letters "were not expected to be published, at all...."[52] Nevertheless, Hooper expressed enormous faith in Woodward and his observations about Indians. "Few men have had better opportunity for studying the Indian character and investigating their customs, than Gen. Woodward."[53] Woodward himself was less confident. In one letter to Hooper, he closed with this remark: "There is too much of this to publish, even if it were worth publishing. Read it, show it to Col. Pickett, burn it and send me his History of Alabama."[54] Despite his own misgivings, Gen. Woodward at least formed his images of the Creeks from personal experience, which is more than can be said of Cooper as well as many newspaper writers of the day.

Woodward's letters also illustrate the haphazard way that news columns might be filled in many papers of the day. At the Montgomery *Mail*, Woodward's letter was recognized for its historical interest and its publication illustrates one reason that private letters became news. This practice was not limited to historical accounts, however. Indeed, the publication of private letters from the frontier was common in many newspapers, no doubt because few other news sources existed on the

frontier. In addition, the frontier had built-in excitement because of its ever-present potential for danger as well as its dangerous and exotic Indian population.

The epidemics of smallpox and other diseases which ravaged the native population in 1830s were a natural topic for the newspapers of the day. But without reporters in the field, the news accounts of this tragedy were easily shaped by the interests of travelers and traders whose letters happened to reach editors in the East. In 1838, for example, the *Western Weekly Review* included this item among a series of news briefs: "100,000 of the Western Indians have died of the small pox since the prevalence of the disease amongst them—so says a traveller from the Rocky Mountains."[55] Despite this alarming message, the paper provided no other information about the epidemic nor did it explain how this information came to the paper. But by publishing this story without explanation, the paper added further credence to the belief in the biological inferiority of the Indians, a race apparently doomed to extinction by disease.

This same point was made explicit in a more extensive account of smallpox among the Indians. This story, composed of several letters from traders on the Upper Missouri, appeared in *The United States Gazette*, and filled about a column and a half. The letters expressed genuine remorse for the fate of the tribes, though the point of view was very much that of the white trader. The writer noted, for example, that he had tried to warn the Indians about smallpox:

> . . . I represented to the Indians that they would if they went near it, be infected by it, but I might as well have talked to the winds. The survivors however are now sorry for their

> obstinacy, and are as humble as poor dogs who seek in vain for their dead masters.[56]

But trade was never far from this writer's mind. Thus the "humble survivors" are seen in terms of economics in the very next sentence: "Our trade in this section is utterly ruined for years to come, nor can all the peltries pay the expenses of the Fort."

The second and third letters in this report turned the natives over to the hands of fate. The second said:

> These unfortunate beings have been fast disappearing before our advances; and Providence has at last threatened to sweep them from the earth.... The ways of heaven are just, yet mysterious, and nations must bow before its will, as the reed before the storm.[57]

Such conclusions shifted responsibility for the epidemic from whites—who, after all, brought smallpox to the Indians—and assigned it to heaven. This shift coincided with the idea of the vanishing Indian, doomed to disappear from the continent no matter what the actions of the advancing whites. By publishing such letters, the *Gazette* opened its pages to the prejudices and judgments of writers who had both personal and economic relationships with the Plains Indians, relationships which were bound to influence their letters.

Although these writers had first-hand experience with Indians, they had no incentive to write fair or balanced reports, especially in their private correspondence. Most likely, these correspondents wrote what they believed to be true, at least as they saw the truth. Thus the smallpox epidemic, which they saw first-hand, could be explained as something more that the ravages of a white disease; it was evidence of the racial

inferiority of the Indians and confirmation of the hypothesis of the vanishing native.[58] First-hand observations, then, like other Indian reports, were subject a variety of inaccuracies and distortions about Indians and Indian life.

News as Rumor: A significant amount of news about Indians during the first decades of the nineteenth century was not first-hand, but second- or even third-hand. Indian news was frequently attributed to papers which editors received in the mail through informal exchange agreements. These exchanges served as a primitive news collective and editors were not shy about reprinting information they found interesting or useful, even without attribution.[59] In any case, a great many Indian stories were republished from exchange papers without confirmation and the result was a great deal of error and contradiction in the news columns.

The Albany *Argus* discovered this problem when it reported on the disturbances by Creek Indians in the South in 1829. Wrote the *Argus*, "The following statement from the last Macon *Telegraph*, contradicts the report which we published from the Columbus *Enquirer*." The *Argus* then published this complicated statement from the *Telegraph* :

> We have received from Col. John Crowell, agent for the Creek nation, a letter...in which he authorizes us to say, that the statement from the Columbus Enquirer is, in many of its important facts, incorrect; and that great alarm has *unnecessarily* and *improperly* produced by it on the frontiers.[60]

It's clear from this explanation that the original information about the Creeks in the *Enquirer* had alarmed their agent, Col. Crowell, and that he

then used the *Telegraph* to help set the record straight. A careful reader of the Albany paper could probably follow this story but there is no guarantee that less careful readers—or other exchange papers—would make this correction.

The Seminole War, once again, provides a number of other relevant examples. Newspapers throughout the country reported the war, but few had reliable sources of information from Florida. Instead, news reports slowly made their way back from travelers, soldiers and sailors who told what they knew to newspapermen in Florida or neighboring states. Of course, such stories were subject to exaggeration, misstatement and a host of other faults. Once published, however, these stories could be picked up by exchange papers and republished throughout the country, amplifying whatever errors appeared in the original published accounts. And in the newsgathering era before the telegraph, editors had no timely way of verifying the facts contained in such reports.

The problem was serious enough to confound editors at the time. The editor of the Cincinnati *Whig* once made an issue of the confusion by publishing these two statements one after the other:

> The Florida war is ended.—Gen. Jesup.
> The Florida war is not ended.—Oceola.

And then he added this commentary:

> Such are the contradictory accounts we constantly receive from Florida. There appears to be no possibility of obtaining accurate information from that quarter. We should not be surprised to hear tomorrow, for the fortieth time, that Gen. Jesup had

> captured Oceola...and on the next day have the whole story contradicted, with this addition—Gen. Jesup and his army have been captured by Osceola [sic].[61]

Confusion, then, was a regular part of the news from Florida. Such a situation further contributed to the tarnished image of the Indian by amplifying errors from the battlefront.

At their worst, Indian news reports were based on rumor. Thus the *Western Weekly Review* in Tennessee reprinted a dispatch from the Milledgeville *Journal* that began with an honest admission of its source: "We hear it rumored that the Creek Indians are exhibiting indications of a turbulent and hostile spirit."[62] At the end of the article, the *Journal* writer revealed his own misgivings about the report: "Such is the story that has reached here. We hope it is exagerated [sic]." Yet the very next paragraph contained new information. "A letter received in this city conffirms [sic] the above and states the Indians were assembling in large bodies with hostile intentions, and that the whites were becoming alarmed."[63] Perhaps so—but the facts presented here do not inspire confidence. No direct evidence on the intentions of the Indians is presented in either report and it is plausible that the Indians were not hostile at all.

With Indian rumors—some of them quite alarming—coming in from the frontiers, newspapers sometimes attempted to distance themselves from the messages they printed. When the Albany *Argus* published a rumor about Indians gathering for an attack in Missouri, the editor inserted this disclaimer: "As to the verity of this, we cannot speak—but we feel it a duty we owe to the public to publish all the information which has been put in circulation relative to this important subject."[64] In other words, the information was not verified and may not have been true, but

the paper was publishing it anyway—a journalistic practice which has never completely died. In any case, given such standards of news, it is little wonder that Indians often received inaccurate news coverage in the press. What this—and stories like it—reveal about Indian news is the uncertain nature of such reporting and the tendency of the press to print whatever information it had at on hand, whether or not it was correct.

In sum, the newspaper exchanges on Indian information in the pre-telegraph era were a useful technique for journalists as well as readers because they functioned like a primitive wire service. The system wasn't fast, but it did convey some sense of the news from the scene. On the other hand, the system could be wildly inaccurate and unreliable, since first reports from the scene had a tendency to be exaggerated. Moreover, as noted earlier, war reports frequently assigned the worst type of characteristics to the Indians. Thus the newspaper exchanges were far from neutral when it came to coverage of Indians, a factor which further skewed the image of the Indian in the press.

Conclusion

Indian news in the antebellum era presented a severely limited image of the Indian. Indians were trapped, in effect, by a pattern of news coverage which consigned them to stereotypes. Sometimes these stereotypes were positive, as when individual Indians were praised for their eloquence or natural dignity. More often, however, Indians were condemned as a race for their violence and perceived savagery.

Unfortunately, neither of these stereotypes offered an accurate portrait of Indians or Indian life.

The negative image of Indians can be partially explained as racial prejudice, prejudice which, when combined with white reaction against Indian violence, created a steady stream of hostility in the press. But the newspapers themselves contributed to this stream of negative images by their willing acceptance and repetition of negative stereotypes. Newspapers published anecdotes which revealed Indians by their weaknesses, while Indians in conflict with whites were invariably characterized as savage and violence-prone. Moreover, in contrast to whites, violent Indians were offered no explanation for their actions, as if they were innately violent. Finally, Indian news in the 1820s and 30s was based not on journalistic investigation or enterprise but on private correspondence, word-of-mouth reports and speculation, all sources open to exaggeration and error. In short, antebellum newspapers revealed Indians by their faults and then repeated these faults as a regular feature of Indian news.

These findings demonstrate how the antebellum press served an ideological function, consistently positioning the Indians as outside the realm of ordinary (white) society. Even when the Indians were treated sympathetically, as in the report of the Cherokee corn dance cited at the beginning of this study, the news still separated the natives from whites, an act which emphasized the differences between the races. In short, the press relied on distortions, rumors, myths, and stereotypes to position the Indian at the margins of American life, ensuring that the continuing

domination of Indians by whites would not be interrupted by any moral confrontation with the idea of Indians as equals.

These findings also suggest that the problems associated with media ideology and cross-cultural communication have roots far back in media history. Carey, for example, has noted that the modern mass media "tend to block out of communication those values, attitudes, and groups which threaten the tenuous basis of social order and provide degradation ceremonies which punish actors and orientations deviant from social norms."[65] Although Carey made this statement in 1969, this paper shows that the antebellum press also carried out a similar ideological function. Likewise, in 1979 Herbert Gans identified ethnocentrism as one of the "enduring values" of American media, especially during times of war.[66] Although Gans used Vietnam as an example in his study, he might well have been speaking of the Seminole wars of the 1830s. In other words, the findings of this study suggest an ideological constancy between the antebellum newspapers and modern mass media, a topic which warrants further exploration.

In cultural terms, the newspapers studied here fulfilled Carey's notion of communication as ritual. That is, the antebellum press published more than information; it portrayed a particular view of the world.[67] Not surprisingly, this view served the interests of the white population by affirming the savage state of the natives and documenting their inferiority and barbarity. But the press positioning of the Indians was less the product of intentional racial prejudice than of an ethnocentric cultural system which operated on and through the press, reinforcing racial stereotypes and limiting the image of the Indian in white society. The

American Indian might have emerged in the antebellum press in other ways, in ways which revealed the diversity of Indian behavior or a sympathy for native customs. But the institutional and cultural patterns at work in American journalism—and in society at large—were much too strong to permit this more realistic image of the Indian to emerge in any popular or sustained way.

ENDNOTES

[1] *State-Rights' Sentinel*, 8 September 1836, 3.

[2] Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., *The White Man's Indian* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 3.

[3] Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972), 9.

[4] Ibid., 10.

[5] James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 133-37.

[6] Ibid., 4.

[7] Roy Harvey Pearce, *Savagism and Civilization*, rev. ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 199.

[8] Berkhofer, xv.

[9] Pearce, 10.

[10] Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1982); Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1973).

[11] James W. Carey, "A cultural approach to communication," *Communication* 2 (1975): 1-22.

[12] Ibid., 8.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See Berkhofer, 3-31, and Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 67-70, 91-95.

[15] *Western Weekly Review* (Franklin, Tennessee), 20 June 1834, 1.

[16] Washington *Telegraph* story in the *Western Weekly Review*, 16 February 1838, 1.

[17] Quoted in Philip Young, "The Mother of Us All: Pocahontas Reconsidered," *The Kenyon Review* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1962): 403.

[18] *The United States Gazette* (Philadelphia), 18 May 1830, 4.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Albany *Argus*, 15 August 1829, 2.

[21] *Constitutional Journal* (Helena, Arknasas), 26 May 1836, 2.

[22] Jacksonville *Courier* story in *The United States Gazette*, 23 January 1836, 3.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Mobile *Chronicle* story in *The United States Gazette*, 27 January 1836, 3.

[25] The number is put at 107 by William and Ellen Hartley, *Osceola: The UnConquered Indian* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973), 149. Also see Frank Laumer, *Massacre!*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1968).

[26] Ibid., 148. Also see Laumer, 150.

[27] Harvey Lewis Carter, *The Life and Times of Little Turtle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 108.

[28] *Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language*, 1963, p. 1522.

[29] Accounts of the engagement can be found in Hartley, 141-149 and Laumer, 128-156.

[30] *The United States Gazette*, 30 January 1836, 2.

[31] New Orleans *Picayune*, 24 March 1837, 2.

[32] Quoted in the *Constitutional Journal*, 21 September 1836, 3.

[33] Ibid.

[34] *State Rights' Sentinel* (Augusta, Georgia), 4 December 1834, 2.

[35] Newark *Daily Advertiser* in the New Orleans *Picayune*, 21 February 1837, 3.

[36] *Journal of Commerce* story of 20 June 1835, in the *State Rights' Sentinel*, 26 June 1835, 3.

[37] New Orleans *Picayune*, 14 April 1837, 2.

[38] Ibid., 17 March 1837, 2.

[39] Ibid., 22 April 1837, 2.

[40] Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism* , 3rd. ed., (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 205.

[41] The dependence of American papers on European news can be traced to the earliest American newspapers and the strong economic and cultural ties between England and the colonies. See, for example, the discussion of John Campbell's Boston *News-Letter* in Mott, 11-12.

[42] Providence *Gazette*, 5 February 1823, 1; 19 March 1823, 1; 2 April 1823, 1.

[43] Ibid., 15 February 1823, 1.

[44] Charleston *Mercury*, 17 August 1838, 2. Also see 20 August 1838.

[45] *State-Rights' Sentinel*, 5 June 1835, 2.

[46] Ibid.

[47] *Western Weekly Review*, 6 October 1837, 3.

[48] Augusta *State-Rights' Sentinel*, 21 July 1835, 2.

[49] *Constitutional Journal* , 28 April 1836, 2.

[50] *Western Weekly Review*, 27 May 1836, 3.

[51] Thomas S. Woodward, *Woodward's Reminiscences of the Creek, or Muscogee Indians, Contained in Letters to Friends in Georgia and Alabama.* (1859; reprint, Tuscaloosa: Alabama Book Store, 1939), 3.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Ibid., 4.

[54] Ibid, 19.

[55] *Western Weekly Review*, 28 September 1838, 3.

[56] *The United States Gazette*, 14 March 1838, 3.

[57] Ibid.

[58] This thesis is the topic of Brian W. Dippie's *The Vanishing American.*

[59] For a discussion of the origins of newspaper exchanges, see Richard B. Kielbowicz, "Newsgathering by Printers' Exchanges Before the Telegraph," *Journalism History* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 42-48.

[60] Albany *Argus*, 12 August 1829, 2.

[61] Cincinnati *Whig* story in the *Western Weekly Review*, 4 August 1837, 1.

[62] Milledgeville *Journal* story in the *Western Weekly Review*, 13 May 1836, 1.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Albany *Argus*, 15 August 1829, 2.

[65] James W. Carey, "The Communications Revolution and the Professional Communicator," *The Sociological Review*, Monograph 13, (1969), 31.

[66] Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979), 42-43.

[67] Carey, "A Cultural Approach," 8.